



# **GRIEVING IN FULLNESS: HONORING LOSS & LEGACY AS BLACK WOMEN**

**A BLACK PAPER**

**RESEARCH-BACKED LOVE LETTERS TO BLACK HEALING**

# What Are *Black Papers*?

Black Papers are love letters to our collective healing. Research-informed, culturally grounded guides created by and for Black people. They center our stories, our history, and our liberation. Each paper honors the ways we have survived while offering pathways to rest, renewal, and thriving.

Black Papers are in-depth explorations on healing, faith, and liberation created specifically with Black people in mind. Unlike traditional white papers, which often center academic voices disconnected from our lived experience, Black Papers are written through the lens of cultural wisdom, clinical expertise, and a commitment to liberation.

This Black Paper, **Grieving in Fullness: Honoring Loss & Legacy as Black Women**, explores grief for Black women as multi-dimensional. Personal, cultural, historical, and ancestral. This Black Paper invites you to honor every layer as sacred, transforming mourning into a path toward healing, resistance, and collective resilience.

# The Problem & Context

## Cumulative Grief & Embodied Racial Trauma

Grief for Black women is rarely singular. Cumulative grief describes how every new loss; death, identity shifts, career setbacks, all trigger unresolved ancestral and cultural pain. Studies show Black Americans are twice as likely to experience prolonged grief disorder compared to white Americans due to structural inequities and historical trauma<sup>[1]</sup>. Chronic exposure to racism leads to what scholars call “weathering”. This is the body’s physiological response to systemic stress, which increases the risk for hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and depressive symptoms<sup>[2]</sup>.

## Disenfranchised Grief: When Our Losses Go Unseen

Many forms of Black grief are disenfranchised; not publicly recognized or validated. Miscarriages, cultural displacement, and the grief of racial violence often go unacknowledged in workplaces, healthcare systems, and even churches. When grief is silenced, it festers as anxiety, tension, and emotional numbness.

## The Cost of the “Strong Black Woman” Schema

The expectation to be unshakeable aka The “Strong Black Woman” schema prevents Black women from seeking help and ritualizing grief. This cultural pressure is linked to increased depressive symptoms, emotional suppression, and suicidal ideation<sup>[3]</sup>. Between 2013 and 2019, suicide rates for Black women aged 15–24 doubled<sup>[4]</sup>. Unprocessed grief is not just emotional; it is life-threatening.

## Key Takeaways

- Black women carry cumulative grief. Personal losses compounded by generational trauma and systemic oppression.
- Unacknowledged grief can manifest as exhaustion, hypertension, and depression; naming grief is an act of resistance.
- Four culturally grounded grief practices help restore connection and community.
- The NAME + FEEL + ACT framework provides structure for processing grief intentionally.
- Rest, ritual, and collective practices are revolutionary acts of healing.

# The Deep Dive: 4 Grief Practices to Reclaim

**“Grieving is not weakness; it is resistance. Every tear, every ritual, is a refusal to let your humanity be erased.”**

## **1. Ancestral Altars & Storytelling (Reclaiming Connection)**

Rooted in West African and Afro-Caribbean traditions, altars serve as a bridge between the living and the ancestors. Place photos, candles, and meaningful objects in a quiet space. Pair this with storytelling nights where family or friends share memories, reinforcing cultural pride and lineage.

## **2. Grief & Memory Circles (Communal Healing)**

Modeled after Indigenous talking circles, these gatherings create sacred space for sharing grief without interruption. Start with a simple ritual. Lighting a candle or passing a symbolic object as each person speaks. For Black women, these circles can validate experiences often ignored by larger society, such as pregnancy loss or workplace discrimination.

## **3. From Dirge to Joy (Celebratory Grief Practices)**

Inspired by New Orleans jazz funerals, this practice blends mourning with celebration. Begin with reflection; soft music, prayer, or lamentation, and gradually shift to joyful remembrance through dancing or playing songs that honor your loved one's life. This ritual embodies the fullness of Black resilience: sorrow and joy coexisting.

## **4. Rituals for Non-Death Losses (Identity, Safety, Systemic Trauma)**

Grief extends beyond death.

- Loss of Safety – Hold a grounding stone during prayer or meditation, repeating affirmations for protection.
- Loss of Identity – Create Identity Reclamation Circles, inviting participants to share songs, clothing, or objects representing their authentic selves.
- Systemic Grief – Host community vigils where participants write down fears or frustrations and release them; burning the paper, floating it in water, or planting it in soil as an act of transformation.



## Practical Framework: NAME + FEEL + ACT

Here's a formula designed to guide Black individuals in developing a personal grief practice that is both validating and healing: the "NAME + FEEL + ACT" Grief Practice Formula. This formula outlines a structured approach to processing grief, allowing individuals to embrace their emotions and take intentional actions that support their healing journeys.

The first step in this formula is to NAME the Loss. This involves identifying and acknowledging what you are grieving, which could encompass a person, a place, a feeling, or an aspect of your identity. Being as specific as possible such as saying, "I'm grieving the loss of my childhood home" or "I'm grieving the constant fear for my safety in the world". This helps give shape to the loss and invites you to honor it. This act of naming is crucial, as it acknowledges the weight of your experience and allows for deeper reflection.

The second step is to FEEL the Emotions connected to this loss. Make space for the emotions that arise whether it be sadness, anger, confusion, or even numbness. It is important to be gentle with yourself during this process, allowing these feelings to surface without judgment. Recognizing that these emotions are a natural response to grief is vital, as it affirms that your grief matters. Engaging with your emotions not only fosters acceptance but also promotes a deeper understanding of your experience.

Finally, ACT with Intention by letting your emotions guide you toward nurturing actions for yourself. Choose an action that resonates with what you are feeling, whether it is something grounding, comforting, or energizing. This approach is about honoring yourself and supporting your body and mind through the grieving process. For example, if you feel sadness, you might take a quiet walk or prepare a comforting meal. Alternatively, if you feel anger, engaging in physical movement, such as dancing or boxing, may be beneficial. If feelings of isolation arise, reaching out to a friend or joining a supportive group can help foster connection.

### 1. NAME THE LOSS

Be specific: "I'm grieving the loss of my childhood home." Naming validates the weight of your experience.

### 2. FEEL THE EMOTIONS

Allow space for sadness, anger, or even numbness. Journaling, walking, or simply sitting with the feelings helps your nervous system process the loss.

### 3. ACT WITH INTENTION

Choose an action that meets your emotions where they are:

- Sadness → Take a quiet walk, prepare a comforting meal.
- Anger → Dance or do grounding physical movement.
- Isolation → Call a trusted friend or join a grief circle.

# FOR US - UNPROCESSED GRIEF IS NOT JUST EMOTIONAL; IT IS LIFE-THREATENING.

## Reflection & Call to Action

Your grief is sacred. Every tear, every memory, every story is part of a legacy of resilience.

This season:

1. Choose one grief practice from this Black Paper.
2. Integrate it alone or in community.
3. Journal: What is this grief asking you to name, to feel, and to act on?

Grieving in fullness is an act of liberation.

## References

- [\*1]: Shear, M. K., et al. (2021). Racial and Ethnic Differences in Prolonged Grief Disorder. *JAMA Psychiatry*.
- [\*2]: Geronimus, A. T., et al. (2006). "Weathering" and Age Patterns of Allostatic Load Scores Among Blacks and Whites in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*.
- [\*3]: Watson, N. N., & Hunter, C. D. (2016). The Strong Black Woman Schema and Psychological Distress. *Journal of Black Psychology*.
- [\*4]: Lindsey, M. A., et al. (2021). Suicide Trends Among Black Youth. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*

## About the Author

Kimberly Reese, LCSW, is a somatic and trauma therapist, speaker, and writer committed to helping Black women heal, rest, and reclaim their wholeness. As the founder of The Reese Collective, she creates spaces for Black people to explore liberation through therapy, faith, and community care. Kimberly is also the creator of the Black Papers series, designed as research-backed love letters to Black healing.

For more on Kimberly's work:

